

CONSERVATION *Showcase*



Farming Trees for the Future

Tree farmers Lee and Lynne Aldrich, in their mid-60s, plan to leave their grandchildren a legacy built on love of family, helping the environment and what they've learned from a lifetime of farming. That legacy has a cornerstone built on a Christmas tree farm and six acres of walnut trees that will grow to be worth \$1.4 million, in today's dollars, in 50 to 60 years.

Lee Aldrich calls those six acres of walnut trees an environmental savings account for his grandchildren. He says, "The walnut plantings help the environment now and will benefit our grandchildren well beyond my lifetime."

Back in the 1960s, Lee Aldrich spent three years in the U.S. Army, stationed in Bavaria. The southern German state's forests and trees made an impression on Aldrich that he never forgot. After the Army, he returned to Wright County and started a farming operation that eventually grew to 1,000 acres of corn and soybean, and also hogs.

The Aldrichs are now retired from farming and Lynne retired from teaching a year ago. What they won't give up is 20 acres of Christmas trees and their grandchildren's six acres of walnuts, they say.



Wright County farmer Lee Aldrich stands next to a walnut tree that he hopes will be harvested by his grandchildren 50 years from now. He grows trees on highly erodible land not suitable for row crops. If the six acres of walnut trees he planted in November 1998 were ready for harvesting today, they would be worth \$1.4 million.

The Aldrich Tree Farm accidentally started some years ago when Lee planted Scotch pines on a hilltop not suitable for raising corn or soybeans. The soil is a mixture of sand, rocks and gravel. The Scotch pines grew well and neighbors started asking if they could harvest them for Christmas trees. He agreed and a business that reminded him of the Bavarian forests was born.

Today the Aldrichs sell about 1,000 Christmas trees a year from their barn, which is converted into a retail store.

According to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) District Conservationist Connie Roys, the Aldrich's Christmas tree business also benefits the environment. "Lee Aldrich," Roys says, "has

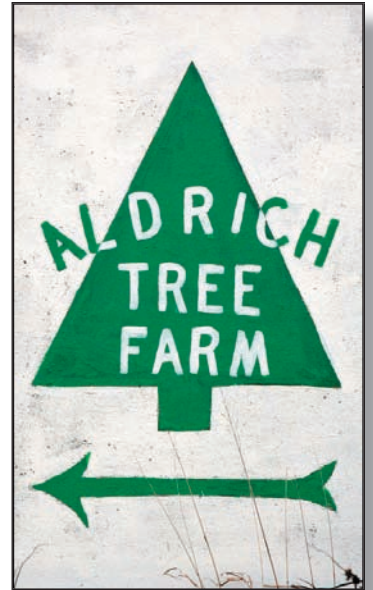
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taken highly erodible land and planted a crop in such a way that it reduces soil erosion and improves soil tilth, water quality and wildlife habitat. From a conservation standpoint, I'd say he's hit a home run with that land."

Because Aldrich believes it takes a lifetime to learn how to grow trees, he has repeatedly sought help for their operation. The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR), NRCS and the Wright County Soil and Water Conservation District have all provided Aldrich technical assistance during the years. State cost-share helped fund herbicide applications, direct seeding, and build a tall fence to protect tree seedlings from deer. Aldrich also partnered with the Iowa Christmas Tree Growers Association, Iowa Woodland Owners Association and Walnut Council which helped him learn to successfully grow trees.

A chance Army posting to Bavaria, a love of family, a desire to protect the environment, have fun and plan for the future have all

come together for Lee and Lynne Aldrich on their tree farm. The Aldrichs are very happy with their farming operation and the way it helps them enjoy and benefit their grandchildren.



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